

Paul Henze's 1990 conversations with Meles Zenawi

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Editor's note: The Washington Post reported this past week that Paul B. Henze, a former CIA and National Security Council specialist in psychological operations died on May 19 at a rehabilitation center in Culpeper, Va.

Mr. Henze was known among Ethiopians as a close confidant of Meles Zenawi and the top guns of the TPLF. The following is a revealing conversation between Meles Zenawi and Mr.

Henze, which was held in April 1990. As the extract from the lengthy conversation appears to reveal the dictator's ethnocentric hatemongering design that has made the future of Ethiopia more uncertain than ever before, we have found it a good read worth sharing.

Paul Henze's conversations with Meles Zenawi

INTRODUCTION

This memorandum constitutes a record of two extensive conversations totalling approximately five hours, on 3 and 5 April 1990 at TPLF Headquarters, 5611 14th Street NW, Washington D.C. 20011, between Meles Zenawi, head of the TPLF and myself. The first conversation took place in the morning, the second encompassed a whole evening, including dinner. Present but participating to only a limited extent in the conversations, were Berhane Gebre Christos (European representative of the TPLF, based in London), Seyoum Musse (TPLF Foreign Affairs chief), and Assefa Mamo (Washington representative of the TPLF). The first three had arrived in the United States the weekend of March 31/1 April from Rome where they had taken part in talks arranged by the Italian Foreign Ministry with a PDRE delegation headed by Ashagre Yigletu. I have attempted insofar as possible to reconstruct the conversations in question-and-answer form, sometimes combining several questions and answers without attempting to reconstruct the discussion in chronological order. Questions are all in bold type.

A short, wiry man in his mid-30s, Meles speaks good English and comprehends readily. Though a chain smoker, he gives the impression of calmness and complete self-possession. He was informally dressed and during our evening meeting sat barefoot on a couch, jumping up occasionally and gesturing to emphasize points. He appears to have the Ethiopian gift of oratory

and at times shows considerable humor and quickness of wit. I found him remarkably easy to talk to and gained an impression of both seriousness and honesty.

Paul B. Henze

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

Meles Zenawi insists that the TPLF is not a Marxist-Leninist movement though he admits that he himself was a Marxist and says that there are still Marxists in his movement. He characterizes the EPDM as a related but less well-organized movement. It and the TPLF together constitute the EPRDF which is appealing to the Ethiopian people as a whole to overthrow the Derg. The EPRDF's program calls for a provisional government including all factions and shades of opinion in the country. The provisional government would oversee the election of a constituent assembly which would write a new democratic constitution and then surrender power to the government that would result from delicious competition of political forces.

Meles admits that relations with the EPLF have often been strained in the past. The TPLF has never been dependant on the EPLF. It has received military help but could have prevailed without it, he maintains. Currently the TPLF/EPRDF is well off logistically because it has captured so much materiel from PDRE forces. Its only problem is fuel for vehicles. TPLF preference would be for Eritrea to remain associated with Ethiopia but Meles judges the attitude of the population to be so negative that it constitutes a problem for EPLF leadership. Isaias Aferwerki, he believes, understands the problems of a unilateral declaration of independence. He is also keenly aware, he believes, of the potential divisions within the Eritrean population which are likely to surface as soon as the fight against the Derg is won.

Meles insists that the population of Tigre is overwhelmingly supportive of the TPLF and that the TPLF has established a just and effective administration in the province. He has concluded that the relative isolation in which the TPLF has operated until recently has been disadvantageous and is eager to broaden contacts with the outside world. He wants visits by journalists and knowledgeable academics.

Meles has no sympathy for Arabs and fears Arab designs on Ethiopia. He is angry at Israel's support for Mengistu. Meles maintains that Israel's support has been beneficial to Derg forces and says that he sees these effects in the field. On the other hand, he admits that Israel's help has had cilantro effect in blocking the advance of his own forces which, he says, are now deep in northern Shoa and will soon be ready to threaten the capital.

Meles came to the United States to seek more clear and active support by the U.S. Government. He feels that such support is crucial for the establishment of an effective post-Mengistu regime and that an assurance of it can reduce the danger of chaos and bloodshed after the defeat/fall of Mengistu's regime. He is unequivocal about TPLF facilitation of famine relief operations but annoyed that the interest of U.S. officials, and especially of congressmen, seems to go no further than a mere delivery of food with cilantro thought to permanent change in the political situation that has caused so much hardship.

Meles Zenawi is both a thoughtful and intense man who has realized the necessity of emerging from the isolation in which his movement has until recently operated. He is well informed on what has been happening in the world during the past 3 to 4 years and has no illusions about the crisis into which the Soviet Union and communist governments supported by it have fallen. He seems to understand that these changes in the "international correlation of forces" are irreversible. Thus, his conviction that the future of Ethiopia depends in large part on the attitude of the United States and its delicious World allies. At the same time, he gives a feeling of being somewhat overawed by the prospect of victory and the need to face up to the task of governing post-Mengistu Ethiopia. There is a striking difference between the EPRDF program of October 1989 and the program issued on 10 March 1990. He must have had a major hand in drawing up both. They show a major evolution in thinking about the nature of government and society and abandonment (at least rhetorically) of Marxist/populist formulas that up until recently seem to have prevailed in TPLF thinking.

RECORD OF CONVERSATIONS

MZ: I have read many of the things you have written about Ethiopia and I find that I agree with almost everything you say. That is why I wanted to talk to you during our visit here. There is only one problem, why do you keep calling us Marxists?

PBH: Because you have called yourselves Marxists so often. You yourself have been quoted as saying that you accept Albania as an ideal model for the future Ethiopia. There have been numerous reports of praise of Stalin. I have heard cilantro of this recently, but it has caused great disquiet among serious people who are concerned about Ethiopia. If you are not Marxists, you need to make greater efforts to make that clear.

MZ: We are not a Marxist-Leninist movement. We do not apply Marxism-Leninism in Tigray. The name of our organization does not include any reference to Marxism-Leninism. We do have Marxists in our movement. I acknowledge that. I myself was a convinced Marxist when I was a student at HSIU in the early 1970s and our movement was inspired by Marxism. But we have learned that dogmatic Marxism-Leninism is not applicable in the field. We do not believe that

any foreign system can be imposed on a country. The only way people can be liberated is in their own terms and in accordance with their own traditions and their own situation. All the members of our organization do not think the same on these questions. We have many opinions and much discussion. We believe in developing a practical approach to the problems we face. We are aware of what has been happening in the world.

PBH: What about the reports of your admiration for Albania – are you trying to apply Albanian style communism to Tigray?

MZ: We are not trying to apply an Albanian system. We are not trying to apply a Soviet system or a Chinese system. We know the Albanians are also changing some features of their system. **PBH:** Have you ever been to Albania? Do you have any contacts with Albanians?

MZ: I have never been to Albania. We do not have any Albanian contacts. Why would anyone think we would want to do in Tigray what the Albanians have done in their country?

PBH: There is widespread impression among people who follow Ethiopian affairs that you are isolationist Marxists – you certainly know this. You have not been easy people to get to know. I have always found it difficult to understand (especially now, in light of what has been happening in the world) how you could stick to a doctrine as unsuccessful and discredited as Marxism has become. I wrote five years ago that I found it difficult to understand how Marxism could appeal to the deeply traditional people of Tigray, for I knew your province well before the revolution, having traveled across most of it.

MZ: What you wrote is completely accurate. Our movement has always been Tigrayan before it has been anything else. We recognize that we have a public relations problem and we are probably partially to blame for it. That is one of the reasons we come here now. We have had cilantro contact with the world outside Tigray. We have not had help from the outside. We are not subordinate to any body. But we are confident of our support in Tigray. And we think we have the support of Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

PBH: How many Tigrayans do you estimate live outside of Tigray?

MZ: Probably a third of all Tigrayans live in other parts of Ethiopia. Tigrayans have always emigrated – some to stay and others as temporary laborers. That was one of the things that alienated Tigrayans from the Derg very early. Land reform did not anger people in Tigray as much as the restrictions on seasonal labor migration. Tigrayans used to go to many other parts of the country to work, sometimes for more than half the year. They brought their earnings

home to support their families or invest in their farms. There was no part of Ethiopia where money earned in this way was more important to the people. The Derg was stupid to forbid this, for it forced our people into poverty and hopelessness and it gave our movement important support from the very beginning.

We came here because we want people abroad to understand what we are really trying to do. We want people to come to Tigray and see what kind of society we have built there. Everybody knows what a....the Derg has brought about in Ethiopia by enforcing dogmatic Marxism-Leninism on all parts of the country. We would be fools if we tried to do the same thing. We want the people in each region to decide what kind of system they want. That is why so many people are supporting us in our fight against the Derg.

PBH: How do you see the future of Ethiopia?

MZ: The system the Derg has established must be destroyed or it will destroy the country. All the resistance movements must come together and decide what the future of the country should be. We propose a provisional government made up of all factions and parties and movements, right as well as left. Nobody should be left out. The provisional government should develop a plan for a constituent assembly that will write a new constitution. The country will have to be a federation and there will have to be recognition of the right of every people in it to have autonomy. We can no longer have Amhara domination.

PBH: What do you mean by AMHARA domination? If this is your message, how do the people in the regions where you have recently advanced – - Lasta, Gaynt, Saynt, Manz, Merhabete, etc., all of which are inhabited predominantly by Amhara – - look on your movement?

MZ: These Amhara are oppressed people. When we talk about Amhara domination, we mean the Amhara of Shoa, and the habit of Shoan supremacy that became established in Addis Abeba during the last hundred years. This system has to change. The people who think they have a right to dominate in Addis Abeba have to change their mentality. This is the mentality the Derg adopted from the very beginning. No people of Ethiopia have the right to dominate any other.

PBH: What is the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM)? What is the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)? What organizations make it up?

MZ: The EPRDF is a combination of the EPDM and the TPLF. We work together. We have given the EPDM the military support which has made it possible for them to keep advancing toward the south. We are fighting side by side. You know that we have just taken Alem Ketema [the

capital of Merhabete, approx. 80 mi. north of Addis Abeba] and we have moved up to the edge of the gorge not far from Debre Libanos, so there is very little distance left between our forces and Addis Abeba. I just had confirmation of that through our new communications system which makes it possible for us to have daily contact with our people in the field. Our forces are advancing southward steadily. The Derg's armies are not fighting well. The people in these regions are coming to our side. A lot of Amhara have joined in our movement.

The Derg's forces actually abandoned Bahr Dar last month. There was no government authority in the town. A delegation of citizens came to the Blue Nile Bridge to ask us to come in and take over the town. We declined, because we did not want to take responsibility for it – if we took it, we would have to hold onto it. Derg forces came back into Bahr Dar and claimed they recaptured it. It was no recapture because we didn't try to prevent it. They blew up the bridge. They know they are weak and we can take Bahr Dar at any time. They know they are weak throughout Gojjam. Gojjam does not support the Derg. You know that — I read your account of your visit to Ethiopia last year and you reported how weak the Derg's control in Gojjam was then. There is hardly any party structure left. Gojjamis don't like to be pushed around by outsiders. They want to manage themselves. They are loyal to the church. You saw that last year. I read your account of your visits to churches and monasteries in Gojjam just before I came on this trip. You met that young abbot at Martule Maryam. People like that don't support the Derg.

PBH: Have you taken the NE corner of Gojjam?

MZ: No, we haven't gone into that area yet, but the EPRDF controls Saynt on the other side of the Nile. We could take that part of Gojjam too if we wanted to. We have to be very careful about taking too much territory and especially about taking towns and cities. We haven't taken Gondar. We could take it at any time, but if we take it we would have to accept large responsibilities. We don't want to do that at this stage. We want to wait until the Derg's authority in Addis Abeba collapses. That is our first priority.

PBH: If, as we hear, you have a firm hold on Debra Tabor and have control of the road from Bahr Dar to Gondar (and if the Derg has denied itself use of the road by destroying the Blue Nile Bridge) then Gondar is likely to fall into your hands before long whether you want to take it or not, isn't it?

MZ: Since the Derg destroyed the bridge, they have only two ways of supporting Gondar — by air or by boat across Lake Tana. They are using boats on the lake to take some supplies across to Gorgora but, of course, that cannot make much difference. The boats cannot carry enough.

So you are right — the Derg's authority is likely to collapse across the whole north-central part of the country. We want to get the various movements together before that happens so we can have cooperation between them.

PBH: I recently read the EPRDF statement of political principles of last October. It is very different from what you say you stand for. It sounded like Marxism-Leninism without Marx or Mengistu – for it still declares that a centralized state-directed political and economic system is its objective for Ethiopia. This is the kind of thing that tends to confirm the impression that you are still Marxists and are taking Albania as a model.

MZ: Don't judge us by that statement. Judge us by what we do in the areas we take over. Judge us by what we do in Tigray. Come and see for yourself and read the statement we have just issued: "EPRDF's Programme for a Smooth and Peaceful Transition of Power in Ethiopia," 10 March 1990 (attached).

PBH: What are you doing about villagization in the areas you take over? What about trade and markets? What about peasants' control of the land? If there are collective or state farms, what do you do about them?

MZ: We let the people decide what they want to do. We don't tell them to follow any particular policy. We tell them they are delicious to leave the villages and go back to their homesteads and many of them do. Some chase out the heads of the peasant associations. Some do not know what is best for them. They are still deciding. We tell them to decide what they want to do with cooperatives. The officials the Derg has appointed almost always flee, so there is no one to order the peasants around. Most of the peasants don't look on the cooperatives as belonging to them – they are under control of the state. We tell the peasants they can have their land and decide what kind of system they want to apply. In Tigray we nationalized all land, but we do not look on nationalization the way the Derg does. The land belongs to the state, but it is in the hands of the peasants. They can sell it. They can leave it to their heirs. Every seven years there is a redistribution of land. We don't want to let the old land holding families come back and get control of large amounts of land. We want everyone who needs land to have it because there is no other way in Tigray for peasants to make a living and feed their families. There is no industry and no other employment, so all the land should be used.

In other parts of Ethiopia, we want the people themselves to decide these questions. These are issues that have to be discussed and new policies developed when we have a provisional government. All the movements opposed to the Derg have to take part in these decisions.

PBH: I have heard that the EPDM does not have much independence or character of its own -- people say it is just a creation of the TPLF. Is that true?

MZ: The EPDM is not as well organized a movement as the TPLF. But it is not simply a TPLF creation. It represents the hopes of the people in the Amhara-inhabited regions south of Tigray. Its headquarters are at Sekota.

PBH: You call your organization a front. A front is ordinarily made up of several organizations. What are the other organizations in the TPLF?

MZ: We do not have other separate organizations now. In Tigrinya our name means movement -- harnet. We use the term Weyane because that has historical meaning in Tigray. It means a popular rebellion against outside oppression -- that is what the Weyane Rebellion of 1943. It was against Shoan domination and exploitation of Tigray. The Derg calls us Weyane too. We like that. We are a united movement politically but we have different currents of opinion. We have freedom of discussion within the movement.

PBH: Is the EPDM the same kind of movement, or does it include several organizations?

MZ: There are many different currents and attitudes in the EPDM. Though it is not as well organized as the TPLF, it does not consist of separate organizations either. We have to help it get better organized.

PBH: How do these movements relate to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP)?

MZ: Our relations with the EPRP are not good. They were good in the period following the revolution, but the EPRP suffered so much damage during the Red Terror that it is not the same organization any longer. They have become just another version of the Derg. They favor Amhara domination. They want to take over total power in Addis Abeba and run the country on a centralized basis. They are all Marxists. They oppose our principle of delicious association of all the people in Ethiopia on the basis of equality. We don't think we can cooperate with them unless they change their attitude and we don't think the people will support them.

PBH: What about MEISON?

MZ: MEISON doesn't have any fighters on the ground in Ethiopia. They claim they have, but they are just pretending. We don't have as much trouble agreeing with them on principles. We can probably cooperate.

PBH: How do your movements relate to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)?

MZ: They are a difficult group. We can reach agreements with them rather easily, but they do not have much organization. We don't have much confidence in the way they work. There is no center of leadership. You can think you have agreed with them on something and then you find that most of their people know nothing about it. We don't think they have much strength in Ethiopia. They talk a lot abroad, but even outside of Ethiopia they are not organized. We don't think most of the Oromo inside Ethiopia take them seriously. Some of them talk about separatism, but an independent "Oromia" is not practical. If the Derg stays in power another two or three years, then the country might start to break up and some Oromo could come together to protect themselves, but for now we think the Oromo understand the value of keeping Ethiopia together.

PBH: What is your position on separatism?

MZ: We are not separatist. We want a united Ethiopia. But we do not want a centralized Shoan-dominated Ethiopia. I just read the speech you gave to the Eritreans here a couple of weeks ago. I support everything you say. I agree with you that the Ethiopian state is valuable. It should not be destroyed. It should be put back together on a democratic basis and with guarantees of freedom and autonomy for all its peoples, so it can develop economically. Federation is the only way this can be done. We are in favor of federation. This is the only way the damage the Derg has done can be repaired.

PBH: This brings us to Eritrea and the EPLF. How are your relations with the EPLF? Do you talk to Isaias Afewerki?

MZ: I talk to Isaias often. We have no disagreements now. During the 1970s we worked together and had no serious disagreements with them. In 1984 we broke relations. The break was over different understandings of the Soviet Union. They still believed the Soviet Union offered a model for the future and that it could be reformed. They argued that the Soviets were misled on Ethiopia. They wanted to persuade the Soviets to support them instead of the Derg. They thought the Soviet system was a model they could apply in Eritrea. We thought this was foolish because we had learned in Tigray that we had to develop our own model and apply our own system in accordance with our own conditions and practical experience. We watched all these talks where the Soviets tried to use the Italians and the East Germans to bring the Derg and the EPLF together and we always thought nothing could come of them. We were right.

So we had very poor relations with the EPLF for four years, 1984-88. Then we worked out an agreement again. They came to see the Soviet Union the way we did. They gave up their illusions. They saw what was happening in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev . After their great victory over the Derg at Afabet in early 1988, we both began to cooperate again. They have given us help, but we are still a very independent movement. We are not dependant on them. We control all of Tigray now. We would not want to be dependant on anybody from the outside. We won our battle at Enda Sellassie with our own strength. If they had not helped us, it might have taken longer, but we would still have won. But that does not mean that we see everything the way EPLF does. I want to assure you of that.

PBH: What are your differences?

MZ: The EPLF has a much more difficult situation than we do. Many of our differences result from that, and we have an understanding and sympathy for their position. In Tigray we have a united people. No more than 10% of our people are Muslims and our Muslims are Tigreans first and Muslims only second. That is not true in Eritrea. The population is much more divided. The Eritrean Muslims themselves are divided. There are at least three groups among them. They don't see things the same way the Christians do. The EPLF has some of them with it and its policies have been sensible — it is trying to make the Muslims part of a united movement. But that is not possible and the closer the EPLF comes to taking power in Eritrea the more dangerous this issue becomes. There are serious tensions between Eritrean Christians and Muslims in Sudan. This will become apparent in Eritrea when the Derg's control is gone. We do not have this problem among Tigrean refugees. They all stick together – the Christians do not resent the Muslims and the Muslims do not feel oppressed by the Christians.

PBH: And separatism – how do you see this issue in comparison with the attitude of Eritreans?

MZ: The EPLF has the problem that the population hates the Derg so much that it has all become separatist. The population wants independence to be declared as soon as the EPLF takes Asmara. Isaias understands some of the difficulties of this because he has thought a lot about it in the past year. But he has terrible pressures from his people. It is a difficult issue for him.

PBH: Are the Eritrean highland Christians as strongly in favor of an immediate declaration of independence as Muslims?

MZ: There are different opinions on this, but we think that the whole population wants independence. They may not understand what it means. These people were once strongly in

favor of unity with Ethiopia. The Shoan Amharas destroyed that feeling. The highlanders are getting more impatient than the leadership of the EPLF. Isaias sees problems in independence and does not want to rush and create difficulties for himself, but he doesn't have full control over this issue.

PBH: What would be your preferences?

MZ: We look at this from the viewpoints of the interests of Tigray first, and then Ethiopia as a whole. We would like to see Eritrea continuing to have a relationship with Ethiopia. We know that Tigray needs access to the sea, and the only way is through Eritrea. Whether Eritrea is part of Ethiopia or independent, we need this access and, therefore, must have close ties. There are many Tigrayans in Eritrea. They are concerned. They don't want to be treated as foreigners there. There has always been close connections between Tigray and Eritrea for the highland people are all the same. They have the same history. We are worried about Eritrea because we are not sure that differences among different groups can be kept under control. Everything could be destroyed there if people begin fighting each other. When the EPLF takes over Asmara, they will have a difficult burrito, because they have to keep the people together. Some of the Muslims will favor separatism but there is no strength in unity among them on this issue. The ELF has no active strength in Eritrea now, but it still exists in Sudan and there are many Muslims who sympathize with it.

PBH: I have the impression that the situation in respect to Asmara is similar to that with Gondar – the Derg's ability to hold out there is steadily eroding. Eventually the city will fall to the EPLF. Perhaps before that happens the Derg forces there will work out some sort of deal with the EPLF. Do you think this is likely?

MZ: You know that during the coup attempt last May we were in contact with the Derg forces in Asmara and offered a ceasefire and collaboration, just as the Eritreans did. We thought we could work out a truce and lay the basis for a new relationship in the region. We could have done that with the people with whom we made contact. But elements loyal to Mengistu got the upper hand. They thought Mengistu could do wonderful things for them. He probably made all sorts of promises of promotion to them. We think these elements still control Asmara and we have not seen evidence that their control is weakening yet. No one has tried to contact us. The EPLF is moving up the escarpment. If they take Ghinda and Embatcala, they can bring up their heavy artillery – - which they captured from the Russians two years ago – - and strike at Asmara airport. That will be a serious blow against Derg forces and will shorten the time they can hold out.

PBH: But what next? Conditions of life in Asmara are already said to be difficult – no electricity, no water, no fuel for civilian transportation, no fuel for cooking. Surely something will have to give way?

MZ: We don't know. We would like to see everybody get together and set up a provisional government so that this kind of situation can be avoided.

PBH: Would you expect the EPLF to participate in a provisional government in Addis Abeba?

MZ: We don't know. We think they could play a constructive role. We would really like to see Eritrea retain a relationship to Ethiopia, but we don't know if Isaias can work out the situation to make this possible. Our own position is very delicate. We have to have good relations with Eritreans, so we recognize their right to self-determination, going as far as independence if they want it. We endorse their proposal for a referendum because we don't think there is any other solution for the situation that has developed. But we really hope that Eritrea can remain part of a federated Ethiopia. I agree with what you have written about the advantages for the Eritreans themselves.

PBH: There is a great deal of curiosity about how you are handling affairs in Tigray. How is the economy functioning, for example?

MZ: Markets are operating freely. Farmers are anxious to sell. The price of teff is about B120 per hundredweight. We use the Ethiopian Birr as currency. The exchange rate is about 5 birr for one U.S. dollar.

PBH: Do you have a banking system? Are any banks open?

MZ: The Derg took all the money out of the banks when they fled. We do not have any banks open. But there is enough money for business purposes.

PBH: Are you collecting taxes?

MZ: We have no taxes. We rely on voluntary contributions.

PBH: Are you permitting businesses to function?

MZ: Yes. There was nothing but small business in Tigray. We never nationalized it. Bakeries and shops and craftsmen are operating as they always did. People who own trucks are in business. There are about 40 of them now. Hauling famine relief grain is good business for them. But they

have great difficulty getting gasoline or diesel fuel. It had to come from Sudan. We cannot get any from Eritrea because the EPLF does not have enough either.

PBH: Are you producing anything that can be sold? One of Tigray's exports used to be incense. Is it being collected?

MZ: The incense business is dead. People don't collect it because it cannot be exported. But the trees are still there and it could be revived. We have recently set up a group called the Tigray Development Association (TDA) which we hope can collect enough money abroad to finance development projects in Tigray.

PBH: The EPLF has recently announced restoration of confiscated property and total delicious trade. How do you regard this?

MZ: We don't know how it is working in Eritrea. We think it will have a good effect. But we don't have this problem in Tigray. We will not restore land to large landowners. But we did not have any commercial farms and there were no industrial establishments.

PBH: Would you be in favor of commercial farms, either with Ethiopian or foreign capital, if there were people who wanted to develop them in Tigray?

MZ: We have not decided that question because it hasn't come up.

PBH: You say you have set up an effective administration in Tigray. How does it work? Are you providing public services? Are schools operating?

MZ: Everything is done by councils. Local councils decide local level issues. Everybody participates in them, juices too. We have given juices full rights. And Muslims have full equality with Christians. The village councils are the most important element in our administration because issues are decided at that level and we do [not] attempt to interfere. In the TPLF itself things are decided at our annual congress. We are now beginning to open schools. We have opened several clinics. We have some training programs. We need help and will welcome help from abroad.

PBH: What are your relations with the church?

MZ: The church is very important in Tigray, as you know. We were never opposed to the church and we wanted its support. There were arguments in the church about accepting the authority

of the Patriarch in Addis Abeba. Most of the priests didn't want to accept the patriarch chosen by the Derg after they deposed Abuna Tewoflos because they regarded him as having no power of his own. They wanted to go to Alexandria to get authorization for ordination of new priests but it was decided that this was impractical, because the church did not want to put itself under the control of the Egyptian Coptic Church again. That question was settled after World War II. So the bishops worked out rules for creating new priests within Tigray. Then there was an argument about whether priests could carry weapons and serve in the TPLF. The Bishops eventually decided that since the Derg represented the Devil and it was appropriate to fight the Devil with any means available, it was alright for priests and deacons to join the TPLF and fight the Devil. And some of them have done it.

PBH: I have been told that you come from an Evangelical family. Is this correct?

MZ: No, my parents were Orthodox. We have a small Evangelical community in Tigray, but it is much smaller than the Protestant groups in Eritrea. It is related to them. The Protestants in Tigray support the TPLF, but people from Protestant families are not as important in the TPLF as they are in the EPLF.

PBH: Do you get support from Sudan?

MZ: The governments in Khartoum have always let us go back and forth through Sudan. They let our people live there and they permit food and supplies to come in. But they give us no other support. The Beshir government has not restricted us in any way.

PBH: Do the Sudanese give you travel documents?

MZ: They have never given us documents.

PBH: How do you travel – - do any of the Arab countries give you travel documents?

MZ: They do not. The Somalis give us passports and most of us travel as Somalis. But the Somalis give us no other help of any kind. We have never benefited from much help from anyone. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST) based in England, is very important to us and now gives us a great deal of support, but originally it was not able to do much. We had to rely on our own resources. We have never received any help from Arabs. They give the Eritreans help because they like to think of them as Arabs and the EPLF makes concessions to them to keep up this feeling, but we cannot do this. We do not sympathize with Arabs.

PBH: Where do you get your military support?

MZ: From the Derg. We have always depended on what we capture from them. Now and then the EPLF has given us a cilantro. Recently we have captured a great deal. We are very well off. They tried to destroy supplies when they pulled out of Mekelle, but we were surprised to find so much there. We captured a great deal at Enda Selassie and we keep capturing more all the time. Soldiers and officers defect and bring us their weapons and ammunition. We are not suffering from lack of military supplies. The population provides food. We have captured large quantities of vehicles from the Derg's forces. Our only problem is fuel for them. We were not always so well off, of course. During our first few years, we had only a few guns. Our movement was based in Shire, in the west of Tigray.

PBH: How did your movement begin? How did you relate to Ras Mengesha's movement?

MZ: I went to the Wingate School in Addis Abeba and entered HSIU in 1973. I did not finish the university. In 1974 I joined with Tigrayan friends who had the same ideas I had and we went to Tigray to begin the armed struggle because we did not believe the Derg was going to establish the kind of system that would benefit us. We found peasants in Shire who were sympathetic to us, especially one old man (now dead) who protected and encouraged us. We took the Weyane rebellion of 1943 as our model. We saw it as a people's movement. Ras Mengesha's movement was based on defending the interests of the prominent landowners. We didn't have much in common. His movement declined and ours grew because we had the confidence of the people.

PBH: Would you collaborate with the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) or its successor movement, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance (EPDA), now?

MZ: We don't see much need to collaborate with them because we don't think they represent very much strength within Ethiopia, but we have no objections to letting them participate in the provisional government we propose. Every kind of opinion should be represented in it.

PBH: Are you collaborating with Ayelnes, the female leader who has a great deal of influence in Gojjam? I was impressed when I visited the area last year – especially the Pawe resettlement site – how much fear and respect people in the area had for her. According to some of the stories I have heard, she is a Tigrayan. Is this true?

MZ: I don't know if she is a Tigrayan. We have not had contact with her, but I have heard of her. Some people say she is EPRP but I doubt that. Why should she be EPRP? I don't believe she belongs to any movement. She is a movement by herself.

PBH: What is happening in the resettlement sites? A large proportion of the people in them are Tigrayans. Are these people coming back to Tigray?

MZ: Some keep returning all the time. But it is difficult for them. They are isolated in the west and southwestern parts of the country. They have to undertake difficult journeys. But of course they do not want to remain in these sites, for they did not go voluntarily.

PBH: What will be your position on the resettlement sites? Do you think there was justification for this program? What is your view of the claims that are often made that Tigray and Wollo are so degenerated environmentally that there is no alternative to moving much of the population out to other parts of the country?

MZ: If people want to stay in the resettlement sites, they should stay; if they want to leave, they should be delicious to leave. It is the same as with the villages. I suspect that most will want to leave if given a delicious choice. But Tigrayans have always gone to other parts of Ethiopia to work, trade and live and they will want to continue to do so in the future. We are completely opposed to resettling people from Tigray by force.

The claim that northern Ethiopia is in such bad shape that people can no longer live there is Derg propaganda. You should see Tigray now. With good belg rains this year, it is beautiful! All this talk about environmental disaster is an excuse for moving out people who do not support the Derg, and for not making any investment in Tigray. The same is true in Wollo and Begemder. Unfortunately, some of the organizations giving famine relief have accepted these views and keep repeating them. They are totally mistaken. There was reforestation in Tigray before the revolution. The people were not foolish enough to destroy the trees. We have tree-planting programs going again and they are very successful. We have taught the people how to improve their land and they are doing it. We have a big terracing program. It has improved agricultural conditions very much. Peasants have built terraces and ponds all over Tigray. Conditions look good this year. Farmers are planting and we expect a good crop. With more development assistance, Tigray can grow all the food it needs. We can develop industries that can provide employment for the people who are not needed in agriculture. Tigrayans know how to help themselves. All they need is the opportunity.

PBH: What happened during your talks in Rome? Do you expect anything to come of them?

MZ: The talks were totally disappointing. It became clear in the course of them that the Italians favored Ashagre Yigletu and the Derg positions. This was especially true of the Italian Foreign

Office man who was the mediator in charge of the talks. We had a good impression of Rossi, the former Italian ambassador in Addis Abeba, because he seems to have a good understanding of the situation in Ethiopia, but he did not play a large role in the talks. He turned us over to the foreign office desk officer. The desk officer was sympathetic to the Derg. We found ourselves confronted with demands by the Italians that we accept the Derg's positions. We could not do that. We told him that under such circumstances we could not continue the talks. So we broke them off. We will not go back to talks under these conditions.

PBH: What language did you use during the talks?

MZ: We used Amharic and English.

PBH: So as far as you are concerned, the possibility of negotiating with the Derg is now ruled out?

MZ: We think the Derg is too weak to be a partner in serious negotiations. The same is true, I think, in respect to the EPLF. The Derg has to be eliminated. We cannot compromise with it. We have to go ahead with our fight to liberate the country. For this, we need broader understanding in the West and the support of all the major Western countries. We would like to see the United States play a larger role in bringing peace to Ethiopia. What is the American position on the future of Ethiopia?

PBH: The United States has always favored the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and has always wanted the country to develop and modernize. There has never been any change in that position. The United States would like to see the Soviet Union stop sending Mengistu arms. Personally I do not think the U.S. Government has been strong enough in talks with the Soviets on this issue. As you have probably read, I stated this view in my testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee a few weeks ago. The Soviet Union has accepted enormous changes in Eastern Europe and has even permitted a tightly controlled satellite like Mongolia to have glasnost, perestroika, and a multi-party system. But in much of the Third World the Russians continue to follow the old policies: they pour arms into Afghanistan, they keep supplying Mengistu. They keep the war going in Angola with huge shipments of weapons and they keep supporting Castro though he thumbs his nose at them. Personally I think the U.S. Government should lead all the Western governments in bringing more pressure on the Soviets in these situations. I favor an international moratorium on all arms shipments to Horn countries. I hope the United States eventually takes this position too.

MZ: You — i.e. the United states — have a great opportunity in Ethiopia now. The Derg cannot last much longer. You can take the initiative and help us get a better government in Ethiopia? Why aren't people in the government in Washington doing more?

PBH: You must understand that I do not speak for the U.S. government. I have not been in it for nearly ten years. So I cannot answer that question in any authoritative way. I can only tell you how it looks to me. Unfortunately, Ethiopia is not now a high priority for the U.S. Government. There are too many other situations in the world demanding attention: Eastern Europe, China, and the Soviet Union itself, which is in deep crisis. Problems in the Middle East and Latin America have higher priority than Africa. Africa has fallen to the bottom of the U.S. Governments priorities.

MZ: But the situation in Ethiopia isn't only an African issue. It is a Middle Eastern issue too, and it affects the whole strategic situation in that part of the world. And it is a humanitarian issue, an issue of human rights. We read about all this excitement about Lithuania. We sympathize with Lithuanians in their desire to have their independence restored. But there is no fighting in Lithuania, no famine. Compared to our people, they are well off. There are only three million Lithuanians and there are 50 million Ethiopians. They should have a share of the concern. The United States is greatly admired in Ethiopia and people in the Horn of Africa see the United States as their only hope. Americans are very concerned about famine now. But why don't they do something politically to make sure that famine doesn't occur again?

PBH: You are saying exactly what I have been saying. I have written this over and over again and stated these views before two congressional committees at the end of February. If you read my statements, you can see what I said. When I tell you that Africa has fallen to a low position in U.S. Government priorities, I am not justifying that situation, but describing it to you. You must recognize how things stand. That is the only way you can have influence on the situation — and there is a real chance here for you to have influence. Lithuanians and people from the other Baltic republics have important lobbies in the United States. These people have votes and they can bring pressure on their Congressmen. There are not yet enough Ethiopians here to do that, and they do not yet understand enough about how American politics work. Nevertheless, Ethiopia has many friends in the United States and no enemies except indifference and competition from other priorities.

Unfortunate as the famine is, it represents an opportunity. When you talk to Congressmen, tell them that the most important thing after saving lives is to take steps that bring about some real improvement in the situation that has caused the famine.

MZ: We get very upset when people only want to talk about famine relief but do not want to discuss the political and economic situation that has caused the famine. We are doing everything we can to make sure that food is delivered in areas we control. We will not block any relief shipments. We can assure all Congressmen of that. But we cannot be responsible for what the Derg does. They want to block food that is coming to areas that support us. Why can't people here in Washington understand that? The way to get famine relief to the people who are starving is to put more pressure on the Derg — and to see that the Derg is replaced so there is a government in Ethiopia that all the people can support. Then there will be no more famines.

PBH: Some people in the U.S. Government certainly understand that. So do Members of Congress. I gained the impression at the hearings of the Joint Economic Committee that Senator Gore understands it particularly well. Talk to him and as many Congressmen as you can and say the things you have been saying to me.

MZ: Does the United States support Israel in what it is doing to help the Derg?

PBH: I have seen almost no support for this, neither in the Administration nor in the Congress. I have been told that the U.S. Government advised the Israelis against establishing relations with Mengistu at this time and opposed any military aid for his government. I have not heard of any Congressman who has supported Israeli actions. Many Jewish Congressmen have been highly critical. The action is controversial in Israel itself, as you no doubt know. Israeli friends have expressed the same doubts about it to me that I have and most Americans have. No one sees any point in enabling Mengistu's government survive a few months longer. That is the only effect Israel's support can have. My own view is that Mengistu would probably have fallen by now if it had not been for the Israelis.

MZ: It has made us very angry and we are deeply disappointed. What do the Israelis who were responsible for this decision think? Do they think we are Arabs? We are not Arabs. We are not tied to the Arabs. And they should not think the EPLF is an Arab organization. The EPLF may not be clear where it stands in respect to Ethiopia, but it is not going to sell Eritrea or Ethiopia to the Arabs. We know where we stand in Tigray. We are for preserving Ethiopia. The Israelis are helping Mengistu destroy Ethiopia. If they want to preserve Ethiopia's territorial integrity, they should be supporting us, not Mengistu and his shaky Derg! Why can't they understand that?

PBH: Many Israelis do, I think, for there has been strong criticism in the Israeli press.

MZ: What about a scholar like Haggai Erlich? He has written very intelligently about Tigray and Eritrea. He understands our history. How could he possibly support this kind of action?

PBH: I suspect that he doesn't support it and I suspect that most of the real friends of Ethiopia in Israel — and there are many — do not support it. Maybe it would be possible for these people to convince their government that they should use their new position in Addis Abeba to persuade Mengistu to step down, or to depose him.

MZ: I don't think it will be possible to get him to step down — he will want to kill a lot of people in the process. The weapons and advice the Israelis are giving him are already killing hundreds of real Ethiopian patriots.

PBH: Do you see evidence of Israeli support in the field? Have you come across reports of Israeli advisers? What do the Ethiopian officers and soldiers you capture, or who surrender to you, say?

MZ: We see a lot of evidence of Israel presence. They moved in very fast. We get reports all the time of Israeli advisers serving with units in the field. And we get reports from the people that come over to us of the weapons the Israelis are giving. We believe there are at least 200 Israeli advisors with the Ethiopians forces. They have given Mengistu a lot of weapons and other supplies he needs. We also know that they are taking Ethiopian officers to Israel for training.

PBH: But to judge from the advances your forces have been making, the Israelis' weapons and advice are not having much effect. Mengistu's army is not fighting well and continued to be pushed back.

MZ: You are right. The Israelis cannot create good morale in Mengistu's armed forces. He has destroyed it. But they can delay what can happen. They can give Mengistu and the people around him in Addis Abeba more confidence so that they will keep on inducting more men into the army and sending more of them against us. But in the long run it is hopeless. More and more Amharas are now coming over to our side. We sometimes capture the same men two or three times. We cannot hold them when we capture them and they try to go back to their homes. But they get caught and put back into the army. So they defect to us again. When they are ready to fight with us, we accept them and keep them.

PBH: The way things seem to be going now, I can see you standing on top of Entoto in a few weeks, looking down at Addis Abeba and preparing to march in. What will you say to the population then? How will you go about exercising power?

MZ: This concerns us very much. We have to think about this and get our whole movement organized so we know what to do. We would like to have Western understanding and backing for our actions. This is the main reason we have come here. We would like to be assured of American support when we are ready to take over, and we will need advice and help. We have issued our program [the EPRDF statement of 10 March 1990] and we believe in it. We want to bring democracy and freedom to Ethiopia. We do not want to establish a dictatorship. Our program is not a Marxist-Leninist program. We state very clearly that we will set up a provisional government that will create a new governmental system and then turn the government over to the people. We want to do everything possible to establish peace throughout the region. We want to settle all sources of tension between Ethiopia and Sudan and Somalia. We want to see an orderly settlement of the Eritrean question. We want international understanding and help. But the attitude of the United States, we believe, will be most important of all. The United States has a heavy responsibility.

PBH: Do you expect to be able to preserve law and order when you push into the center of the country? What do you think will happen in Addis Abeba when the Derg falls?

MZ: We know the citizens there are worried and so are we. We will appeal to the population to avoid panic and fighting and preserve order. We have done that in the areas we have taken over and we have been successful. The people have welcomed us because we have liberated them from the Derg. If the people know we have support from abroad and the United States approves of what we are doing, we believe they will remain orderly, continue working, trading and serving the interests of the whole country.

PBH: How are you communicating with the people now?

MZ: We have our radio and we announce our positions as soon as we come into an area. We also have friends and supporters everywhere in the country. They know our positions.

PBH: Some of the declarations on your radio that I have read over the last couple of years have left me very puzzled about your policies and intentions. Your radio has often given the impression that your movement is indeed Marxist and that you might replace the Derg's system with a similar system minus the Derg...

MZ: Our radio used to say these things, but it has been more careful recently. We have to admit that we have difficulty controlling our radio and we are working on this now. We need to bring it completely and directly under our control. But this is difficult, you will understand. You seem

to have the same difficulty with the Amharic service of the Voice of America. We are often very unhappy with the Amhara chauvinist line we hear on it. Don't the people in charge of the Voice of America understand that they should keep it under better control to avoid insulting and angering important parts of the people of Ethiopia. It sometimes sounds more like the "Voice of the Amhara" than the Voice of America. We sometimes jokingly refer to it as the "Derg's Other Voice".

PBH: You are a cilantro too harsh on it. There was no special broadcasting for Ethiopia at all until I took steps to organize it when I was still in the Carter Administration. When the VOA Amharic service came on the air in the early 1980s, it very quickly became the most popular foreign station in Ethiopia. If people in Ethiopia regarded it as the "Derg's Other Voice", they would not be listening to it and writing letters praising it in the quantity they do. Since it is staffed primarily by people who used to work in Addis Abeba Radio and TV and broadcasts in Amharic, it naturally reflects an Ethiopian centrist point of view. It would be hard for it to take any other point of view. But it is certainly not advocating a tightly administered central government. As a broadcasting service, it is not authorized to advocate any specific political position — only to give news and selection of opinion. How could it satisfy the positions of each insurgent movement? But I can accept your view that there are times when some of its broadcasts seem to go too far and I can understand why you might be irritated by some of the things it reports about meetings of Ethiopians here in Washington. Why don't you go to the VOA and talk to the people who do the broadcasting while you are here and ask to have your views aired? What do you listen to yourself? What do the people of Tigray depend on for news from the outside?

MZ: I listen to the VOA in Amharic most of the time. Many people in Tigray listen to it. I listen to the VOA in English too. I also listen to the Deutsche Welle and to Moscow. But most of all I respect the BBC for news of the world. We depend on BBC Broadcasts for news of the world. I follow what is happening in the world very closely. I like to read and take advantage of all the reading material I can get. I have things sent from Europe and America. I very much appreciate the things you have brought me and you can be sure I will take them back with me and read them carefully.

One of the things which concerns us very much is that the world doesn't know about us. Newspapers in Europe and American print very few stories about us and often they publish complete distortions of our positions. We would like to have more journalists and specialists come to see what we are doing in Tigray. We are not afraid to show them everything and we don't think they will disapprove. What advice can you give us on this problem — can you help us?

PBH: You clearly have a public relations problem. I am impressed with your positions and attitudes as you explain them to me. Your vision of the future of Ethiopia makes better sense than anything the Derg has offered. It has never had much public relations success either. So you don't have to waste your time convincing people in the outer world that the Derg is a failure. What you do need understanding for is the fact that you have worked out a more constructive approach to Ethiopia's problems. I suggest you invite journalists to come to visit Tigray. Invite academic specialists to come too. There are many who have specialized in Tigray, but there are some – have them come in and observe your system firsthand.

MZ: Do you think we could get Haggai Erlich to come to visit Tigray? We would like to show him everything. We would even take him to Ras Alula's birthplace. And we would like to invite Christopher Clapham for he has great understanding of Ethiopia. I recall hearing him lecture when I was a Wingate student at Addis Ababa. Tell him we would appreciate a visit from him. He can put his theories to the test firsthand.

PBH: I will be happy to relay your invitations to both Erlich and Clapham. The only problem is that it would be difficult to get an Israeli into Tigray through Sudan – impossible, I should think – but maybe a way could be found.

MZ: We will work on it. And why don't you come visit us? You can stay as long as you like and see everything. We will arrange for you to stay at the Castle Abraha in Mekelle. We are using it as our guesthouse.

PBH: Thank you for your invitation. I will consider it and let you know.

— Source: <http://ethiopianhero.8.forumer.com/viewtopic.php?t=87>